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MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Morton H. Halperin

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE INSTRUCTIONS
APPLY

SUBJECT: Vietnam Alternatives

This memorandum summarizes the major options now open in Vietnam. Annexes will spell out for each option the assumptions, arguments for and against, and consequences of failure.

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I. Where We Are

The events since January 20 have probably reinforced Hanoi in the view that, if it continues to wait us out and appear somewhat reasonable, U.S. public opinion will eventually force the U.S. simply to withdraw from Vietnam or to accept a face-saving agreement. Political opposition in the U.S. will almost certainly become more vocal over the next months, reinforcing Hanoi in this belief. We still do not have any precise understanding of the extent to which the GVN is making progress in increasing its control of the countryside. In response to NSSM 19 on Internal Security, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, supported by State and CIA, reported that pacification is making very little progress and would not unless there were radical changes in the program. JCS and MACV dissented, arguing that there was substantial progress. We know that the enemy is suffering heavy casualties but there is a consensus that Hanoi is prepared to accept these costs for some time. Moreover, the enemy controls the level of casualties and can reduce his costs if necessary.

Thus, even if it is true that time is on our side in South Vietnam, progress will be painfully slow--far too slow for our domestic critics.

II. Alternative Strategies

In light of this situation, three options are examined: (1) current strategy, (2) Vietnamization, and (3) accelerated political negotiations.

A. Current Strategy

Our current strategy continues to aim at keeping two options

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equally open: (1) negotiation of a political settlement in Paris; and (2) gradual Vietnamization of the war to permit U.S. disengagement in the absence of settlement. We could continue to go down these two roads. There has been some movement in Hanoi's negotiating position and a number of signs point to an intention on its part to negotiate seriously in the late summer or early fall. (Both enemy internal propaganda and the empty pipeline support this hypothesis.) The gradual process of Vietnamization that we have started puts pressure on both Saigon and Hanoi to negotiate.

However, our emphasis on free elections is simply not attractive enough to the other side. Every election held in Vietnam has been won by the people conducting it. Hanoi assumes this will continue to be true even if there is a mixed election commission or international supervision.

Another fundamental problem with this strategy is time. Even if the NLF and Saigon were to begin negotiating in good faith, it will take some period for them to come to a settlement unless the outside pressure on both to reach a quick agreement were enormous. Our Vietnamization program and our veiled threats of escalation are simply not sufficient to bring that pressure.

Beyond the problem of time, unless we now choose decisively one of the two forks in the road our policy will become increasingly contradictory. If we are really depending on Vietnamization and do not expect a settlement, we should not be pressing Thieu to make a conciliatory political offer and to broaden his government to include neutralist elements. Such action creates a belief in South Vietnam that the Thieu Government will have to go, and makes it less likely that the anti-Communist opposition groups will rally to the GVN. By alienating conservative elements and creating distrust in the Army the negotiating process reduces the probability of effective Vietnamization which must be based largely on the conservative anti-Communist elements in the South. Conversely, if we are focusing on a negotiated settlement we should be pressing Thieu harder on a broadening of the government to include neutralists and not waste our capital on issues connected with Vietnamization (e.g. officer promotions), and not increase the independent military capability of ARVN.

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In the end, we may find the following two alternatives sufficiently unattractive that we will continue down the current road but, if we do so, we should proceed with full recognition of the inherent contradiction and the likelihood that we may find time running out.

B. Vietnamization On Fixed Timetable and Reduced Emphasis on Negotiations.

Under this approach, we would tell Thieu that we are not asking him to make any further concessions publicly or privately regarding a political settlement. Nor would we give him any advice on political or, indeed, military problems in the South. Rather, we would give Thieu a timetable first for the withdrawal of U.S. ground combat forces in two years and then for the withdrawal of much of the remaining U.S. military forces over a second two-year period. We would tell Thieu that, within reason, we would provide him with any military or economic assistance he may request. Publicly, we would say that the President's May 14 speech represented the most forthcoming position we could put forward without any meaningful response on their part and a willingness to negotiate seriously. The enemy has refused to negotiate on that basis and thus we see little prospect of a negotiated political settlement. We have, therefore, developed a time-phased plan to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese. We could point out that we will see to it that the South Vietnamese are better equipped and trained than their opponents and indicate that there is no reason why South Vietnam should not be able to defend itself even against North Vietnamese aggression. This strategy has the great advantage that the initiative is largely in our own hands. The principal weaknesses are as follows:

(1) The Saigon government might collapse rather quickly when our policy is made known.

(2) Hanoi might concentrate its military efforts on keeping U.S. casualties high even as we withdraw our troops and occasionally decimate a South Vietnamese unit. If such events occurred we would be under great pressure either to accelerate our withdrawal or to end it and bring some troops back.

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(3) Some would charge that we had abandoned our objective of permitting the people of South Vietnam to freely choose their own political future.

(4) If we are forced to suspend our withdrawals after 12-18 months, Saigon may be sufficiently strengthened as to refuse to negotiate.

C. Accelerated Political Negotiations

Under this approach we would not announce any further withdrawals but would seek to accelerate the process of political negotiations. To do so we would have to abandon two elements of our current posture:

(1) The current GVN must remain in power nominally over all of South Vietnam until after free elections or until it freely negotiates the formation of a coalition government.

(2) We should not discuss the elements of a political settlement with the other side in the absence of the GVN.

If we are prepared to abandon the first point but continue to refuse to accept the enemy demand for a peace cabinet, we could seek a form of territorial accommodation. Under this approach, the situation which has existed for many years in South Vietnam would be given a measure of legal status. Many villages in South Vietnam have never been under GVN control; the NLF has controlled some of these. The NLF also has some measure of influence and recruitment and tax power in other villages. Territorial accommodation would invoke implicit acceptance of the status quo and would seek to rule out efforts to change it by force. The NLF would be recognized as being in control of the territory and population in South Vietnam it now controls while the GVN would retain control over the areas it now controls. Power would be shared in contested areas. The most effective way to get such an accommodation might be to negotiate a ceasefire in place.

With regard to negotiating procedures, if we abandon our current stance we could either accept the DRV invitation to negotiate or we could try to negotiate with the Soviets either bilaterally or in the context of a reconvened Geneva Conference.

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A successful pursuit of this strategy aimed at producing a settlement by the end of the year, aside from requiring willingness on our part to relax our terms would also require the development of leverage which will at last force the Soviet Union to bring effective pressure to bear on Hanoi. This will require increasing Soviet concern about the possibility that we will start dealing with the Chinese, making clear to the Russians that in the absence of a Vietnam settlement we will vigorously resist their efforts to organize a Collective Security arrangement in Asia and perhaps ultimately instituting a blockade of North Vietnam. We would use our influence in Saigon to get its agreement to our negotiating a political settlement. In the end we would have to be prepared to use all of our leverage to get the GVN to buy the agreement. We would not use up any leverage on Vietnamization issues.

The fundamental difficulties with this strategy are:

(1) Hanoi may not in fact be prepared to accept any settlement which does not meet all of its current terms.

(2) We may not be able to find a way to bring the Russians actively into the process; and

(3) Thieu may find a way to resist and to undermine the negotiations by making clear his refusal to cooperate or he might be removed from effective power in a right wing military coup.

(4) Even if the negotiations are moving rapidly, pressure to accelerate our own troop withdrawal would mount.

(5) If we succeed, the situation can easily go sour in a few years and we would have to accept full blame for what occurred.

(6) If we fail, Saigon is likely to get the blame and public support for our position will be weakened. Moreover, support in South Vietnam for Thieu will have declined and US-GVN relations will have worsened. Both these developments would make it much less likely that Vietnamization would work if we then turned to that option.

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